

# Appalachian Speech

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Appalachian speech was determined by the predominance of the Scotch-Irish in the settlement of the Mountain region prior to and following the American Revolution. Recently arrived from Northern Ireland and not yet assimilated into the older colonial culture, the Scotch-Irish who moved into the mountains brought with them an old-fashioned northern English dialect that had changed but little during the stay of their ancestors for four or five generations in Northern Ireland. Isolated in the rugged terrain of Appalachia, their descendants continued until recent times to speak essentially the dialect of their remote Lowland Scots and northern English ancestors. In the meantime the speech of their cousins along the Scottish Border and in Ireland was becoming modern. Thus the sixteenth-century dialect of the Appalachian people is the oldest living English dialect, older than the speech of Shakespeare, closer to the speech of Chaucer.

Of the 9 million people living in Southern Appalachia, 94 percent of them descended from pre-Revolutionary American ancestors, between a half million and a million of them, mostly older people living in isolated rural areas, continue to speak the old dialect, essentially the same from West Virginia to the mountains of North Georgia and Alabama. However, almost all people of native stock, regardless of economic, social, or educational status, have traces of the older dialect in their speech. Most persistent are traditional pitch, intonation, melody patterns, inflection, and rhythms.

Prototypical Appalachian speech overlaps extensively with the folk speech of other American rural groups of colonial British stock, particularly with reference to the use of archaic strong past tense forms, old-fashioned words and idioms, case forms, and certain vowel sounds that are generally considered dialectical. "He *skun* the 'possum"; "Aye *gonnies*, I'll try it"; "*Me and him* both *heared* it"; "I *growed* up about *haaif* way between *Gaaistonia* and *Gaaifney*"; and the vowelization of the long *i* into something that approaches *ah* may be heard throughout the South as well as in Appalachia.

Many aspects of speech in the mountains differentiate it from other dialects. First, there is the traditional manner of speaking. Appalachian folk appear to speak with fixed chins and half-closed mouths. Both front and back vowels and diphthongs are pulled toward the middle of the mouth as if all were being reduced to schwa, or the light "uh" that often clutters up the speech of educated people. This tendency leads to a fracturing of all of the short vowels except *ɔ* in

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Appalachian speech. "Bat" becomes "ba-it"; "bet," "be-it"; "hit," "hi-ut"; "cup," "cu-up"; "where," "whu'ur." Back vowels except  $\bar{o}$  slide forward toward schwa: "what," "wha-ut"; "brush," "bresh"; "shut," "shet"; "nice," "nahce." The long  $u$  sound in Appalachian speech, like short and long  $o$ , is singularly pure. Mountain folk consistently use the long  $u$  in such words as "roof," "root," "school," and "stool," but "put" and "soot" rhyme with "nut."

Appalachian speech, like the speech along the Scottish Border, is heavily oriented toward  $r$ . Mountain folk use a strong  $r$ , but it is never trilled as in Scottish speech. The mountaineer loves  $r$  so well that he rarely passes up an opportunity to pronounce it. In fact, he loves it so well that he will attach it to certain words with open endings: "narrow," "narrer"; "window," "winder"; "widow," "widder"; "tobacco," "backer"; "potato," "tater." Unlike the New Englander, he does not attach  $r$  to words like "Cuba" or "idea." Instead, he says "Cuby" and "idy."

The sound of  $r$  is also inserted in many words in mountain speech: "woman," "womern"; "breakfast," "breakferst"; "ruin," "rurn"; "onion," "ingern"; and sometimes "bursh" for "bush."

The mountaineer, his mouth fixed comfortably for schwa and  $r$ , begins to blend  $r$  with the preceding vowel or diphthong as soon as he can. In "bear," for example, as soon as  $b$  is articulated, blending begins. The result is a diphthong peculiar to mountain speech which outsiders spell and pronounce "bar." However, it is not "bar," which, for the mountaineer, is a castrated pig. Instead of a broad  $a$ , as the outsider would have it, the diphthong becomes vowelized in a glide from schwa to  $r$ , a kind of twisted sound which outsiders, even those trained as actors, find difficult to master.

The average American accepts without question four pronunciations of "bear":  $b\check{e}$ -er,  $b\check{e}$ -uh,  $b\check{a}$ -er,  $b\check{a}$ -uh. But when he hears the persistent "barr" of the mountaineer, he laughs. Including those who have migrated elsewhere, nearly 13 million Appalachians use this sound, a larger number, it is believed, than those who say "b\check{e}-uh" or "b\check{a}-uh." With history on their side, are 13 million people wrong?

The mountaineer's blending of vowels and diphthongs with following  $r$ 's leads also to a different quality for a long  $i$  preceding  $r$ : *fire* and *wire* become *far* and *war*.

The diphthong *ou* is a triphthong in mountain speech, a sound peculiar to Appalachians. This sound, which had not yet stabilized in English speech in colonial times, is sounded differently among Americans of colonial ancestry. In parts of Virginia, North Carolina, and South Carolina one hears "ab\check{a}-ot the h\check{a}-os." Perhaps  $3\frac{1}{2}$  million persons use this sound, but they do it with pride. However, the preponderance of mountain folk, who say "ab \check{a} u uht the h\check{a} u uhs," become self-conscious and hang their heads in shame when attention is called to their way of saying *ou*.

Mountain folk, along with other Americans with colonial ancestry, do not sound  $g$  in *-ing* endings. We cannot say that they leave off the  $g$ ; they never did get around to adding it, which appears to have been an unfortunate accident in the development of our language anyway, for final  $g$  is very definitely a brake on the movement of speech and does damage to melody. But the Appalachian, who

has retained the Middle English preposition *a* as a prefix to *-ing* verbals, pronounces *-in'* in his own way. In Coastal Carolina one hears *wri-tin'*, *fly-in'*, *spea-kin'*, with a light stress on the short *i* in *-in'*. The mountaineer says *a-writ-un*, *a-fly-un*, *a-speak-un*, with the vowel in the *-ing* ending a very light schwa that might best be understood if the words were spelled *a-writ'n*, *a-fly'n*, *a-speak'n*.

Mountain folk also indicate cultural values in some of their idiomatic expressions. With a traditional respect for the integrity of the individual and the sacredness of private property, the mountaineer says *you'ns* (you ones) rather than the illogical *you all* heard throughout the South. "This hyur book is *his'n* (his own, his one), an' that thair'n is *her'n* (her own, her one)" reflects the emphasis upon ownership and a desire for preciseness in identification.

Outsiders note readily numerous obsolete strong past tense forms in Appalachian speech: *holp* or *hope* for *helped*, *skun* or *skunt* for *skinned*, *axt* for *asked*. Mountain speech, if differentiated at all in this regard from folk speech of other people with colonial ancestors, is differentiated only by the frequency of the occurrence of these forms rather than the quality.

Past tense forms of strong verbs in which *a* occurs are generally not used: past tense forms of verbs like *come*, *run*, *swim*, *begin* are *come*, *run*, *swum*, *begin* or *begun*. Transitive and intransitive differentiations are not made for *sit-set*, *lie-lay*, *rise-raise*, the mountaineer preferring *set*, *lay*, and *raise* both transitively and intransitively.

A few preferences that are almost prejudices also obtain in mountain speech. *Those* is a hifalutin' word. *Them* both as pronoun and demonstrative adjective is preferred. Such contractions as *isn't*, *doesn't*, *aren't* rarely occur. *Wasn't*, which is both singular and plural, is pronounced *wudn't*.

The following is a folk tale in the prototypical dialect of Appalachia. It is the kind of tale a seventy-five-year-old grandmother who either did not go to school at all or did not get to go long enough for her teachers to do damage to her speech might tell her four-year-old grandson.

#### "THE FOX AND THE BUM'LEBEE"

Oncet thay uz a fox 'at tuck a notion one mornin' he'd walk daown to the store in the settle<sup>mints</sup> at the maouth of the creek. He had to have 'im some lampawl an' a plug o' chawin' 'backer, an' 'laowed, by Jacks, he might buy 'im a can o' sammons, ef the price uz right. Wul, sar, whilest he uz a-sankerin' along, a-thankin' abaout first one thang an' then t'other, he jist happened to spy a sur-vagerse big yaller-stripedy-bellied bum'lebee a-smaoulin' over a blossom 'at uz a-growin' on a mornin' glory vine on one of the post-es thair by the side o' the big road. So's an' he snuck up, right cyurful like, an' recht aout an' snabbed 'im, an' popped 'im into a poke he had with 'im . . . an' didn't git stung nary time . . . an' then he went on.

D'reckly, he come to this hyur haouse 'at uz a-standin' acrosst the bra-a-anch. So's an' he walked right daown ferninst the gate an' hollered, "Hello!"

A womern come an' stuck her head aout at the door an' said, "Haowd-do?"

What'd ye have, mister?" The fox says, "Haow abaout me a-leavin' this hyur poke hyur whilest I go on daown to the maouth o' the creek to the store? I aim to git me some lampawl, an' a plug o' chawin' 'backer, an' I 'laow, by Jacks, I might buy me a can o' sammons, ef the price is right."

"W'y, come right in, ef ye can git in fer all o' the cluttermint. I've been a-layin' off fer might-nigh a week to redden up this hyur ol' place, but a body jist cain't never git araound to doin' nothin', don't pyur like. Jist putt it daown hyan side o' the farplace, ef ye can find room fer it."

Wul, the fox he walks over an' putts the poke daown, an' then he looks at the womern, right straight like, an' says, "Naow, don't ye be a-openin' that thair poke whilest I'm gone." An' then he went on.

Agin he uz aout o' sight an' saound o' the haouse, that thair womern says, "Naow, I wonder jist what's in that thair poke. Aye gonnies, I'll see!"

So's an' she walks over an' picks up the poke an' onties the strang. The bum'lebee, a course, flies aout. Wul, her ol' rooster 'at jist happened to be a-standin' thair tuck aout atter it, but the danged thang got away.

She tied the strang back, jist like it wuz, best she c'd ricollect, and putt the poke back daown, and hooved it up in the middle jist like it wuz so's an' hit'd look like nobody had teched it.

Then she grabbed her snuff-box daown off from upon the farboard whur it stayed at an' set daown in the rockin' chur fer a little rub whilest she commenced to begin to a-thinkin' abaout a-startin' to redden up the haouse, and that thair ol' fox come back.

He walks over an' picks up the poke an' onties the strang. The bum'lebee, a course, hain't thair. He looks at the womern, right mad like, an' says, "Whur's my bum'lebee?"

The womern says, "W'y, I jist ontied the strang an' peeped in the poke an' the bum'lebee flew aout. My ol' rooster 'at jist happened to be a-standin' thair tuck aout atter it, but the danged thang got away."

"Wul, then," says the fox, "the rooster's mine."

So's an' he cotch the rooster an' popped *him* into the poke. An' then he went on.

Atter a bit he come to another haouse 'at uz a-standin' by the side o' the road. Thay uz a ol' womern a-settin' on the porchstep a-peelin' Arsh 'taters an' a-throwin' the peelin's to her pet pig. The fox walked right up ferninst her an' says, "Hello!"

The womern says, "Haowd-do? What'd ye have, mister?"

The fox says, "Haow abaout me a-leavin' this hyur poke hyur whilest I'm gone daown to the maouth o' the creek to the store? I haf to have me a quart o' lampawl, an' a plug o' chawin' 'backer, an' I 'laow, by Jacks, I might buy me a can o' sammons, ef the price is right."

"W'y, jist putt it thair agin the wall sommers. Jist anywhurs'll do, I reckon."

The fox walks over an' putts the poke daown. Then, he looks at the womern, right straight like, an' says, "Naow, don't ye be a-openin' that thair poke whilest I'm gone." Then he went on.

The womern went on a-peelin' her Arsh 'taters. When she uz done, she riz up to go in the haouse an' noticed that sompin' in that thair poke wuz a-movin'

araound. She says to herse'f, "Naow, I bet you the yurs offen my head that that 'air ol' fox is the very varmint that made off with my choice turkey tom. I thinks to myse'f yistid'y when the turkey tom didn't come to be fed that I seed his ol' crookedy track in the sa-a-and along the bra-a-anch. I aimed to ax my ol' man to set a trap fer the lowdown varmint an' clean fergot it. Aye gonnies, I'm a-goin' to see what's in that thair poke! Hit jist maought be my turkey tom."

So's an' she hitched her apern up, an' went over an' picked up the poke an' ontied the strang. The rooster, o' course, flew aout. She grabbed at it but missed it. She called her little boy 'at uz araound behind the haouse a-playin' in the bra-a-anch. He come a-runnin' an' chased that thair rooster all over the yard, an' clean daown the haul road to-wardge the barn, an' plum' around the barn, an' through the entry of the corncrib, but the dang thang got away.

So's an' she wropped the strang back araound the poke an' tied it back jist like it wuz, best she c'd ricollect, an' putt it back agin the wall, an' hooved it up so's an' hit'd look jist like hit hadn't been teched. Then she went on in the haouse an' putt her Arsh 'taters on to fry. An' she come back to the porch an' set daown in her rockin' chur to rest a spell, an' that thair ol' fox come back agin.

He walked over an' picked up the poke from agin the wall whur he'd putt it at an' ontied the strang. The rooster, o' course, wudent thair. Then he looked at the womern, right mad like, an' says, "Whur's my rooster?"

"W'y, I seed sompin' a-movin' araound in it, an' so's an' I jist ontied the strang an' peeped in, an' the rooster come a-floppin' aout. I grabbed at it, but the dang thang got away an' went a-squawkin' acrosst the yard. I called my little boy 'at 'uz back araound the haouse a-playin' an' he come a-runnin' an' tried to ketch it. That pore li'l yongen run that ol' rooster all over this hyur yard, an' clean daown the haul road to-wardge the barn, an' all over the barn lot, an' clur through the entry of the corncrib, but the dang thang got away. When that thair chil' got back to the haouse agin, hit uz a-pa-aintin' an' a-blowin' an' hits tongue uz a-hangin' aout, hit uz so-o-o tard!"

"Wul, then, the yongen's mine," says the fox. An' so's an' he ketched that 'air li'l boy an' putt him in the poke. Then he went on.

Hit uz a-gitten' way up in the day when he come to a haouse 'at uz a-standin' on a little ba-a-nk above the big road. Thay uz a womern a-settin' on the porch an' a-strangin' beans. She uz a-sangin' a song-ballet an' didn't pay the fox no mind, pyeerd like, whilest he's a-waggin' the poke with the little boy in it up the pa-a-th that led out from the ind of the porch. When he got right up ferninst the porch he says, "Hello!"

The womern stopped her song-ballet and says, "Haowd-do? What'd ye have, mister?"

The fox says, "Haow ababout me a-leavin' this hyur poke hyur whilest I'm gone daown to the maouth of the creek to the store? I'm a-layin' off to buy me a quart o' lampawl, an' a plug o' chawin' 'backer, an' I'laow, by Jacks, I might buy me a can o' sammons, ef the price is right."

"W'y, jist put it daown thair on the ind o' the porch sommers. Jist anywhurs'll do, I reckon."

So's an' the fox he putt the poke daown agin the wall. Then he looked at the womern, right straight like, an' says, "Naow, don't ye be a-openin' that thair

poke whilst I'm gone." An' then he went on.

Naow, this hyur ol' womern wuz awful busy. She hatent got a soon-a-nough start with her work, an' she had workhands to fix dinner fur that day besides. So's an' she started her song-ballet another gin an' begun to strang her beans like the devil a-beatin' tanbark an' fergot all abaout the poke.

Atter a while she thought she heared sompin'. She hushed her song an' stretched her neck aout to listen, but she ditent hear nothin' no more. Then she begun to a-strangin' her beans an' heisted her tune agin an' hatent more'n got it aouten 'er nose when she uz dead shore she heared sompin' agin. She stopped a-sangin', an' gethered up the tail o' her apern, an' riz up aouten her chur, an' walked to the fur ind o' the porch, an' listened. She ditent hear nothin' no more. So's an' she went back an' set daown an' begun to a-strangin' her beans another gin, an' uz jist a-gittin' her maouth all waound up fer to heist her tune agin when she heared somebody a-sayin', "Let me aout o' hyur! Let me aout o' hyur!" She'd plime-blank fergot all abaout the poke. Hit uz that thair little boy a-wantin' aout!

So's an' she hitched up her apern an' went over an' ontied the strang an' the little boy stepped aouten the poke. He told 'er haow come he happent to be in it. So's an' she called the haouse dog an' put him in the poke an' wropped the strang araound it an' tied it back jist like it wuz, best she c'd ricollect, an' putt it back daown in the same place whur it wuz at.

She hatent hardly more'n got set back daown in 'er chur agin when that ol' fox come back. He walked over an' picked up the poke. Seein' as haow hit hatent been pestered with none, as fur as he c'd tell, he swung it over his shoulder and went on.

Hit uz a-gittin' 'way up to-wardge noon an' the sun uz brilin' hot. 'Twarn't long afore that thair ol' fox begun to pa-a-nt an' huff an' he uz a-gittin' awful hongry. A-finally he seed a maple tree 'at flung a dark cool shade on a little gra-a-ssy patch on a knoll acrosst a fence. So's an' he clumb over the fence an' started to a-waggin' his load up the hill, a-thankin' abaout what a good dinner that fat juicy little boy uz a-goin' to be everwhen he got hisse'f up thair agin that maple tree.

Wul, he set daown an' leaned hisse'f back agin the tree an' pulled the poke up a-twixt his knees, a-thankin' the live-long time 'at he uz a-goin' to have him a larrupin' fine dinner of little boy any minit naow. He got hisse'f all fixed fer to eat his dinner.

So's an' he ontied the strang . . . an' aout baounced that haouse dog an' caught ol' Mr. Fox by the nose!

That dog had him a good dinner, 'baout that time.